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ABSTRACT

Conflict-mitigation is a concept and methodology that emphasizes a broad societal understanding of conflicts obtained mainly through in-depth interviewing with many and varied actors. Developed through the work by the Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research (TFF), the conflict-mitigation process is intended to serve a number of purposes: (1) enable the parties to solve conflicts themselves to the largest extent possible; (2) serve as early warning, preventive diplomacy, and multi-track diplomacy; (3) understand better the peace-making potential of civil society; (4) help not only the conflicting parties but the international community through an open and open-ended process; (5) work with drafts or interim reports that the conflicting parties are invited to comment on; and (6) lead to an informal third party role in some cases. The practice of conflict-mitigation section follows the purposes and describes interviews, analysis, and reports. A list of 21 directions that the TFF and other parties can take provide suggestions for where conflict-mitigation can lead. Eighteen conflict mitigation principles show what the TFF adheres to in its work and what it tries to help others learn. (CK)

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CONFLICT-MITIGATION
Philosophy & Methodology

Jan Øberg

Conflict-mitigation is a concept and a methodology that the TFF (Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research) has developed to some extent in its projects in former Yugoslavia. It emphasizes a broad societal understanding of the conflicts obtained mainly through in-depth interviewing with many and varied actors. It is intended to enable the parties themselves to solve their own conflicts to the largest extent possible. The concept of mitigation is used deliberately (rather than solution or mediation). It signifies a modest indirect approach providing perspectives, concrete proposals and some tools that can be used by the parties themselves.

In this paper (presented to the Peace Education Workshop at the EUPRA Conference in Budapest, November 1993), Jan Øberg summarizes and discusses the major characteristics of the conflict-mitigation process as it has been used by the TFF teams.

Conflict-mitigation is a concept and a methodology which the TFF (Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research, Lund, Sweden) has developed to some extent in its projects since September 1991 in former Yugoslavia (Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Bosnia-Hercegovina and Kosovo) which is reported in e.g. *After Yugoslavia – What?* and *Preventing War in Kosovo*.

It emphasizes *a broad societal understanding of the conflicts* obtained mainly through *in-depth interviewing* with many and varied actors. The TFF teams consist of experts in conflict-resolution, international law, Yugoslavia and the Balkans, psychoanalysis, sociology and journalism.

It is intended to serve a number of purposes:

• **1** First and most importantly, to help ease the process and *enable the parties themselves to solve their own conflicts to the largest extent possible*. Since people "own" their conflicts our task is not to present readymade solutions, but to listen and help them solve their own problems, i.e. playing the role of "conflict doctors" rather than "judges".

We deliberately use the concept of *mitigation rather than solution or mediation*. It signifies a modest indirect approach, producing important elements of an unbiased understanding of and for the parties and providing perspectives, concrete proposals and some tools which can be used by the parties themselves.

It should be emphasized that this is *down-to-earth empirical field research* rather than simulation, pure theory development or workshop seminars at a comfortable distance. The world is an ongoing laboratory experiment in conflict management and although it is not without danger to visit areas with tense conflicts or even open violence, this is what we feel must also be done by scholars.

Why is it uninvited? To secure that the team is totally independent and unbiased and maintains the freedom to seek interviews with any party in any region. This is particularly relevant in complex conflicts with more than two parties. Furthermore, the sense of being at service – a goodwill mission – is increased and the likelihood increases that various parties will see the teams as a natural Third Party to rely on.

• **2** TFF studies and missions serve *early warning*, *preventive* (citizens) diplomacy, and *multi-track* diplomacy. Representatives of governments and international organizations such as the UN certainly perform a very important function, in many cases of conflict management and peace-

keeping.

But they themselves would be the first to admit the limitations: they usually get into a conflict when it has already become "hot" and displayed violence and they cannot obtain a broader societal understanding from all levels or from parties which are not recognized as legitimate actors. Likewise and with the exception of a few recent conflicts, they cannot get access to internal conflicts nor approach the problems without the prior consent of the parties.

NGO experts, independent groups can get access to these parties and provide helpful insights, precisely because they are informal and do not represent any national or international power. They can analyse conflicts, find facts and suggest creative violence-preventive measures at an early stage and they can, in principle, get into any society and start interviewing various actors and feed this into governments, other NGOs, the United Nations and humanitarian organizations.

To quote a high-ranking UN official from a conversation with us: "The UN still cannot deal with a conflict before it hits the front page of the New York Times, but your type of organization can, and we certainly need information directly from the conflict spot."

• **3** Then there is the problem of peace-*making* – negotiations, mediation, confidence-building, from the top (as in Geneva) and from below (a few local activities, but generally not). Our recent field work there makes it abundantly clear that although the UN peacekeepers, UNPROFOR, are in place in Croatia, there are few change agents whose task it is to get the former combatants into a process of reconciliation, structural change and peaceful co-existence.

The UN keeps the peace, but how will future violence be prevented when the peacekeepers have to withdraw? At present there are no local, regional or international efforts which aim at *peace-building* defined as changing the structures and perceptions that lead to war in the first place. On the contrary, Serbia as well as Croatia increasingly seem to view the UN deployment as part of their future politico-military designs – something that has already spilled over into the Bosnia-Hercegovinian war theatre.

Mitigation teams can make a contribution to peace-making precisely because they seek a broader societal understanding and *understand better the peace-making potential of civil society*. Again, conflicts like these belong to all society, not just decision-making elites.

Peacemaking represents a major challenge to the international system in

general. The TFF is in the process of producing a report on peacemaking possibilities in Croatia with the help of Unprofor and the international community; it seeks ways to circumvent the present stalemate in the negotiation and reconciliation process there.

• **4** Conflict-mitigation is *an open and open-ended process*. Traditional conflict-resolution experts and mediators work with small selected groups, usually at the top decision-making level. They take them to faraway pleasant surroundings and help them deal with their psychological barriers and successively learn to cooperate and see mutual interests. This is certainly needed but to create lasting results one must devote considerable energy in community reconciliation ("peace from below") and develop coherent strategies for the implementation of high-level "peace plans".

Conflict-mitigation places the analytical results and policy-oriented proposals *at the disposal of everyone in the conflicting societyies* who wants to listen. We make deliberate use of mass media as well as an ever-expanding network of personal contacts, of course predominantly those we have interviewed.

Next, the reports (or executive summaries of them) are placed at the disposal of the United Nations, fed into the particular bodies that deal with the situation in this particular country such as various information collecting desks, assistant secretary generals, envoys and relevant UN missions. The reports are also sent out to other international organizations, to embassies, relevant media, humanitarian organizations and to the scholarly community.

Although it may sound very ambitious it is important to *help not only the conflicting parties but also the international community* to understand better the complexities of conflicts and help them avoid the simplifications that much policy making is built on ("We must *do* something to *punish* the *bad* guys"). That will increase the likelihood of avoiding taking steps that are clearly counterproductive from the point of view of peaceful conflict-resolution. The Yugoslav conflicts makes it abundantly clear that such a need exists within the international community.

• **5** Where feasible we work with *drafts or interim reports which the conflicting parties are invited to comment on*. At the same time it is crucial that the team, being unbiased as a non-party to the conflict, present its own creative ways and images of future solutions that polarized parties usually do not see themselves precisely because they are locked into the conflict.

It is our experience that this has a considerable *goodwill-building potential* with all sides in a conflict. If there is one thing people lack in tense situations it is proposals as to how to avoid violence, alternatively how to stop warfare. High-level politicians and many others throughout former Yugoslavia have willingly shared their time and expressed their appreciation of the mission's work.

Although it is impossible to measure, it is our impression that the type of analyses and proposals that we have delivered to various parties have made a positive contribution and, in former Yugoslavia at least, struck a positive note of hope with otherwise war-depressive people.

• **6** If the circumstances and the conflict-mitigation analyses, the reports and the responses so permit, the goodwill character of the mission is likely to lead to an *informal Third Party role*. In the case of Kosovo, the TFF has been invited to (a) develop a set of rules for a future negotiation process, (b) help negotiate a plan for bringing back Albanian children to the schools, (c) help facilitate an informal meeting parallel to the Geneva process and (d) produce a final report on the Kosovo issue based upon the comments and suggestions of about twenty people on both sides.

How to Practise Conflict-Mitigation

Conflict-mitigation starts out from *book knowledge* and obtains a solid understanding of the general background, be it historical, political, economic, psychological or anthropological, through interviewing specialists, journalists or diplomats with expertise concerning the conflicting parties. Books, however, are often outdated in relation to contemporary conflict circumstances, the ways they are acted upon during, let's say, the last 6-12 months. Purely academic studies, further, are less likely to reflect the intensities, human dimensions and everyday qualities of the conflicts.

Before departing, experts in Scandinavia and elsewhere have been approached and their suggestions registered. Next comes the *preliminary contact work*. This is easier than many would believe at the outset. By means of letters and faxes explaining the purpose of the mission, the first contacts will soon respond and through colleagues at universities (who sometimes are also politicians) doors surprisingly quickly will begin to open. Soon a few present themselves as useful *local liaisons* who understand

the purpose of the mission and are willing to help it on the spot.

There will always be a "standard list" of personalities that ought to be interviewed such as government officials, party leaders, important persons in culture, arts and sciences etc. They can be approached before departure; the less formal and less conspicuous but highly central figures only emerge after some time on the spot.

Mediators and third-party intervenors usually emphasize the importance of face-to-face communication in the resolution and conciliation stage. However, we emphasize *face-to-face communication already in the analytical stage*. The analyst coming – as in our case – with a totally different background must *listen very carefully at all societal levels to what is being said and how*. Empathy, therefore, is an important quality.

We carry out an *in-depth interview for about one to two hours* (some with tape-recorder, some not) with each – be it an scholar, priest, refugee, opposition leader, popular movement representative, farmer, presidential adviser, military commander, human rights advocate, public official, housewife, pensioned general, taxidriver, dissident, poet or a journalist. Top decision-makers such as ministers or presidential advisers are, naturally, a necessity for a comprehensive analysis. In former Yugoslavia we have now interviewed about 700 individuals at all levels and walks of life. However, the point is that conflicts should not be analysed as if they belonged only to those in power and solutions should not be explored that only reflect their views.

We are sometimes asked: What is your general methodology? What is your sampling method? When field work is carried out in war zones or in a country in – or close to – warfare, *the methodology becomes rather much determined by the circumstances*. To maintain anything else would be untruthful. We use our background knowledge, the liaisons and scholarly colleagues in the country to identify the first set of interviewees; there is a number of persons with whom it is always important to speak and with whom no local facilitators or hosts are needed such as e.g. local newspaper editors, colleagues to the team members, respected national figures retired from politics, leading political party spokespersons etc.

We deal with various circles and liaisons, not just one, in order to ensure that a broader section of actors and opinions are presented to us. It is imperative that *the local liaison(s)* of the team cannot be identified with one conflict party or any particular interest group. An independent intellectual, a research institute, or an NGO can perform in that role. It must understand fully the idea of mitigation and help identify the broad variety

of persons the team shall meet, be reliable, committed, willing to work for the team at odd hours, good at arranging meetings and keep a dairy. Preferably the person(s) should also have a good ability to listen, and interpret interviewees. It will also be this person or group that helps the team to make practical arrangements in what is often difficult circumstances.

Experience tells that the first steps are the most difficult; but the more you have interviewed, the more are willing to be interviewed. In a sense, *the process snowballs* by itself. It is wise at the end of a conversation to always ask the question: who would you recommend us to talk to, on your side and from the opposition/the other conflicting side? It is absolutely necessary to be flexible – getting access to concrete individuals depends on their physical presence, time and willingness. One should not ignore the fact that sometimes it yields more useful information to interview a deputy chairman of a political party than the chairman; the first may have more time and dare reveal, for instance, that there are fractions in that party. Also, meeting under less formal circumstances, for instance having lunch together at a café, is often more productive than meeting in an office.

One absolutely essential *precondition to get people accept an interview and feel relaxed* is to get through – orally, in writing or both – to the person with five messages: What is the TFF? What is the team's purpose? Why is the interviewee essential? What will be the focus of the talk? What will come out of it – e.g. a report? Short professional letters, brochures and the like are the sine qua non of reaching busy people.

We deliberately take for granted during the interview sessions that the person, simply put, prefers peace to war – knowing well, of course, that that is not always the case. *One set of standard questions revolve around the issue: What do you see as possible solutions?* Like many others we have experienced that the majority of actors look only at yesterday and today but seem incapable of looking at tomorrow and almost all conflicting parties are more willing to talk about "the other" than about themselves and think negatively rather than constructively. Thus, conflicts are locked or frozen rather than opened and solved.

The interview situation itself is structured *to invite the persons to reflect on alternative ways of acting and identifying common longterm interest*. We therefore always ask questions such as: What would you on your side have done differently when today you look back upon the process that lead to the present conflict/war? and How do you think the other side(s) perceive(s) your behaviour? or What should a proposal from the other

contain for you to react constructively on it? And: You have now stated your goals in this conflict; what is your strategy to achieve them?

In some cases it has turned out to be possible *to get close to the personality of the interviewee*. With high-ranking decision-makers it is useful to explore what shaped personal values and perceptions, e.g. how a particular feeling of guilt or hate has taken roots and when and why he or she decided to join politics.

Obviously, we guarantee all interviewed parties *anonymity*, their views will not be presented in a manner making it possible to refer them to any particular actor, but they will be integrated into the analyses.

The TFF conflict-mitigation *team does not arrive with any pre-conceived idea* as to what could or should be the solution. There is no "model" only a general methodology, a considerable background knowledge and the combination of the team's competences.

Apart from these types of interviewees we attempt *to understand civil society*. After all, it is the citizens who must learn to live with conflicts or solutions. Whereas much conflict mediation remains political, we try to assess what role features such as energy, infrastructure, economic development, transport, education or the media play in the conflict and for the process of change towards settlement.

It must be emphasized – repeatedly – that *individual citizens and groups, movements and various organizations do have creative ideas* (although perhaps considered 'unrealistic' by formal decision-makers) and they are usually not influenced by the option of taking to violence and repression as are for instance, implicitly, government representatives. Neither do they have the same personal power invested. We hope to catch this energy because we interview a broad selection.

The interviews and sometimes conversations with our team can serve as a first eye-opener, a catalyst to the interviewee. The method used permits each of them to recognize something about him- or herself and since a mitigation effort like this will almost always be looked upon as a *goodwill* mission the conflicting parties will take a serious look at the proposals we present later in reports and discuss them with us.

Immediately upon return, the materials are *analysed and systematized*. We produce a report and sometimes an *interim report* and/or an *executive summary* of just 5 pages or so that reaches key decision-makers for instance in the UN system. In the case of Kosovo the TFF has worked with groups of scholars, politicians and media people on both sides who were asked to give their views on an interim report.

The reports will offer three things: analyses of the conflicts, a series of short- and long-term proposals and a manual of conflict-resolution principles and tools, adapted to the particular actors.

Our mission will not re-write the official history or background to the conflict but, rather, bring together the human expressions of all these different people's perceptions and participation in conflicts, *their* conflicts. Conflicts do not exist independent of human beings and they do not exist only between them but also *within* human beings. It is extremely important, therefore, to let interviewees speak about their own lives as they relate to the conflicts.

Such features are spelled out in the report that will also reflect the multitude of opinions and approaches. By means of anonymous quotations and descriptions of attitudes *it will communicate important facts to all concerned that have not or could not be articulated. It serves, thus, as a neutral messenger between parties who perhaps have no contacts but basically speak bad about each other.*

Dissemination of the report through the media in the conflict area is of particular importance. In Yugoslavia we did this through the international press centre, and direct contacts with journalists and columnists of leading dailies, radio and TV stations. Our experience is that this has a positive effect on the preparedness and attention of citizens as well as high-ranking decision-makers to deal *constructively* with resolution and not just articulating their grievances. This applies to the early stages of the mission's work in a conflict area and serves also the purpose of making the mission known locally. In later stages, however, where direct consulting, mitigation or mediation possibilities, mass media attention is almost always directly counterproductive.

To offer an example, our report which has also been translated to Serbo-Croatic suggested the deployment of UN troops as buffers around the Serbian majority areas in Croatia at a time (October 1991) when the international community was of the opinion that the United Nations still could not be engaged in what was considered internal affairs of a member state and neither Serbia nor Croatia would accept the UN. We have no concrete evidence that the report influenced high-level decision-makers, but after our presentation of the report in both republics both parties began to advocate UN deployment.

Presentation of the report in involved countries and to relevant international organizations is another very important task. TFF reports on Yugoslavia reach selected members of the diplomatic community and

mediators in the International Conference on the Former Yugoslavia (ICFY) and the UN; they reach various media in Yugoslavia and the Nordic countries. Likewise, they get to humanitarian agencies and conflict-resolution specialists and networks. We have found it particularly important to help educate the general public in order to balance media reporting which often focusses on war and violence rather than on possibilities for resolution and longterm peace and stability. Thus, 3-4000 reports and books have been sold and distributed over the last couple of years.

To secure that the results are made available to anyone concerned the *report must be written and presented in a way that can reach a broad audience*. Also it must have an executive summary directed at busy decision-makers and media people. However, because it also contains a larger analysis and some conflict-resolution tools it *permits decision-makers or others to seek our expertise* for direct third-party mediation, participation in conflict-resolution seminars or whatever, should they so wish.

Because of the TFF's work in former Yugoslavia, we have been asked by various actors in several of the republics/states such as parties, research institutes, popular movements and others to participate with lectures, to serve as advisers for the establishment of an inter-ethnic study centre, to set up workshops on reconciliation, to participate in an international NGO project for peace etc. TFF has served as an informal Third Party between the federal government of Milan Panic in Belgrade and the leadership in Kosovo and is an informal adviser to the Kosovo-Albanian leadership. During 1993 it has devoted its resources to the conflict between Croats and Serbs in Crotia and the role of the United Nations, engaging also in shuttle diplomacy and planning of mediation/consultations between the parties.

The *ideal conflict-mitigation team* consists of one who is a scholarly expert in the country or region, one psychologist, one conflict-resolution expert, one international lawyer, one retired diplomat, a writer or journalist, an assistant-cum-interpreter, i.e., seven persons, perhaps supplemented with special expertise relevant for the particular circumstances.

Since it can sometimes be difficult for practical and budgetary reasons to put together such an ideal team it is possible to carry through the field trip with only parts of the group if the planning is excellent, competence and knowledge shared effectively and *all* the team members contribute to the writing of the report.

What Can It Lead To?

TFF perceives this activity as part of a larger commitment. This is the stages we work with:

- literature studies and reliance on other experts;
- interviews and analysis
- dialogue and conversation over time with key individuals, leading to:
- confidence-building with each actor
- within the system as a whole
- discussion of alternatives to the use of violence
- smaller tasks, such as carrying messages between certain parties
- advisory tasks, developing concepts and principles to be used by the parties
- shuttle diplomacy, sounding out positions and reporting them fairly to all
- indirect dialogues through third parties
- presenting parties to a conflict with a mitigation agenda and principles
- getting selected parties into a direct dialogue/mediation around the same table
- helping them through implementation upon returning
- educating people themselves through courses and workshops to handle their own conflicts towards peace-building
- getting out at the right time.

This is what can be done with the parties, on the spot. Below follows some other tasks to be performed vis-a-vis other actors:

- analysing what other conflict-mitigators/mediators do and develop alternatives and niches they do not cover;
- informing various UN bodies and, in this case, the Geneva negotiators;
- informing media, humanitarian organizations, popular movements etc.;
- informing the scholarly and more action-oriented community;
- influencing public opinion and decision-makers in our own countries;
- assisting those who handle the consequences of the conflicts here – such as immigration authorities, local community, and others (such as journalists) who seek information about the trouble spot.

Conflict-Mitigation Principles

We believe that conflict-resolution and -mitigation is a craft as well as an art. The principles we adhere to in our own work and try to help others learn are, among others:

- Conflict-mitigation means helping others solve their problems, not imposing our solutions.
- Conflicts in and of themselves are *positive*, a precondition for pluralism, growth and freedom of the mind. Only some ways we choose to handle conflicts are bad.
- It is more important to determine *what* a conflict is about than who is *the guilty*. Even if the spotted guilty disappeared, the *problem* would often still be there. Chasing the guilty means revenge or tit-for-tat and propels actors further away from a solution.
- It is necessary to get to the roots of the conflict and let off steam. But only *constructive* views of a common future – not quarrels about the past – inspire viable solutions.
- To solve a conflict, the parties must *perceive* it in new ways, *think* in new ways and *start acting* in new ways. Verbal commitment is not enough.
- Identifying *interests* is more important than locking oneself up in a position.
- Keeping *alternatives* open is a safe way. Blocking communicating and stereotyping others is a recipe for locking the conflict.
- Procedures, negotiations and the solutions must be based on objective standards applying to all sides.
- There is usually your truth, their truth and *a larger truth* – and people know it.
- *Means* are goals-in-the-making. Good goals cannot be achieved through bad means.
- There is our side and their side and the *relationship*. Taking steps to harm or humiliate the other is counterproductive and not in our interest. Taking steps that help us and don't harm the relationship is wiser.
- It is wise to develop *one's own strategy*, stick to it and propagate it, inviting the other to do the same. Just reciprocating or re-acting to the other is dangerous. Imitating the wrongdoer makes our deeds wrong. An eye-for-an-eye will one day make the whole world blind.
- Conflicts not only split people, they also unite them. Opponents may disagree on everything, but they share the judgment that what their

conflict is about is important to them. *That is the key to peace:* recognizing that there is a common problem to be solved. Peace and conflict-resolution, therefore, does not imply that we give in and act as nice guys or girls, or accept being bullied around by the tough ones.

- *Power* is not to punish or kill, but to achieve one's own goals together with others, without harming them and without hindering them from realizing theirs.
- *Violence* – be it physical, psychological, direct or built into a system – is a proof of incompetence and powerlessness in the face of conflicts. Violence never solves a conflict; it breeds aggression and violence. Problems solved by violence always reappear later.
- To *solve* a conflict implies voluntary agreement on how to achieve a future better for each and the relationship. A good solution does not appoint a winner and a loser. It transforms the issue, the perceptions, attitudes and the behaviour of the parties.
- A good solution can also consist in *agreeing to disagree* and why and separate from each other in a civilized manner, minimizing pain on all sides.
- *Mitigators do not take sides among parties*, like a doctor does not scold a disease carrier or patient. Mitigators are "conflict doctors" who help the patients to recover from the disease and prevent relapses. Mitigation is urgent care and prevention in one. We take a stand against violence and other kinds of ineffective attempts to solve conflicts.

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Three related reports:
After Yugoslavia – What?
Preventing Violence and War in Kosovo
Yugoslavia – A Conflict Management Crisis
(The reports can be ordered from TFF.)

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